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Grey September

"As usual, nothing will ever be the same again"⍰ (The Press)1

For three days, the Guardian reader knew everything about the inner structure of the Twin Towers. Two weeks later, you couldn't catch him out about the exact location of Herat and Kandahar. One morning he learnt of the existence of a new mass killer called bin Laden, the next he was informed this evil figure was a creation of Western politics. Today's absolute becomes relative tomorrow. Every tearjerker is nullified by the next one, and every lie soon followed by its semi-refutation. "Facts" only exist in a perpetual therefore meaningless present. No society has ever lived in such a succession of partial self-criticisms.

Those who simply denounce outrage and excess will always be one step behind radio and TV. Only a very naive citizen believes official versions (39 years after a US president got shot in Dallas, do we know the truth? As most States had a hand in the rise of Islamism, we can't take seriously what we're told about its "networks", since 99% of the information comes from police sources.) Still, it would be even more naive to take the exact opposite view of the official version.

It takes a lot for a civilisation to realise it can die. It takes a lot more for it to admit it can cause death.

The underpaid washer-up and the overpaid white collar who both died in the World Trade centre died as footsoldiers of a system that exploited their death (treating them as heroes of free trade and the free world) as it had exploited their life. They

had little time to appreciate the much vaunted security they'd bought in exchange for their submission.

After September 11, a New Yorker said he now realised the danger of living at the heart of the world economy. He equated life with keeping out of trouble and doing one's job without caring about its causes and results, about what the world economy and its heart mean, or about the risks run by those billions living on its periphery.

People were appalled by the suicidal aspect of the attack, by such a destructive nihilism. Yet isn't mass destruction a current feature of this civilisation, and indeed one that capitalism does not seem to soften? The last two hundred years are more a vindication of "marxist catastrophism" than of optimistic liberalism or reformism.

Commentators also forget that most religions prefer another (supposedly better) world to ours. But our time prides itself on being tolerant, and no longer refuses religion. To create scandal, you just have to express an open dislike of Jesus, Buddha or Mohammed. Atheism is only accepted as a belief among others. The XXIst century regresses to pre-bourgeois revolution times.

Man's total power is supposed to be proved by its expanding vertically (thanks to skyscrapers) and horizontally (the megapolis). We tap all the energy and the resources of the Earth and make the most of them in concentrated accelerated forms.

Sometimes, however, a big power cut, a nuclear or a food scare, the wreck of an oil tanker, an exploding chemical plant, a hurricane, or a large scale attack, reveal the precarious foundation of a world based on circulation but forced to realise and accumulate value by solidifying it ever more: it puts on weight in order to be lighter, piles up materials to become immaterial, uses steel and glass to turn into 0 and 1, and always builds up stock to increase its flow. What looks virtual in fact multiplies machines, warehouses and means of transportation. Every big firm has its big buildings. Every passageway can be blocked: the more fluid a system is, the more vulnerable it is to a computer virus, and to water, air or food poisoning.

The WTC crash forced people to rediscover mass violent death brought about by the very mediations supposed to protect and enhance life: the jet plane[2] and the skyscraper. Did we need September 11 to regard any technical object as a possible murder tool? Railways took people to death camps. Caterpillar tracks support an army tank as well as a tractor. The plane takes a couple on a honeymoon, or flies over Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. To wait so long before realising it is indecent: worse still, it's very stupid.

Terror as Reality and as Representation

Let's leave aside illegalism, so-called anarchist violent deeds, the Weathermen, the German R.A.F., etc. There's a whole world between shooting the Renault boss (as Action Directe did) and killing thousands of persons in two huge high rise

buildings, even if those towers stood at the heart of international finance.

We won't deal with moments like the French 1792-94 Terror either: let's just remember it was long claimed as an unpalatable yet positive political method, and presented in a favorable light by the French Republic in its schoolbooks.

The obsessive repetition of words like "terror"? and "terrorism"? transforms anyone into an innocent, and relieves every one of his responsibility. The deceased occupiers of the WTC towers are said to have had no part in the way the world is run: we're told capitalism runs on its own, freewheeling no matter what we do, irrespective of the worker who manufactures bullets, of the accountant, of the trader. Quite a few finance experts died in the WTC. It would be foolish to think that slaughtering them would undermine capitalism; it is equally absurd to declare them innocent of this planet's fate, and to be flabbergasted at the hate directed at a place like Manhattan. The New York Times reader lives in a dream, and is horrified when it turns into a nightmare, but the only way out of the nightmare is to wake up. We make this world, so we can un-do it and make it again. On the contrary, regarding ourselves as victims contributes to our own dispossession.

It's like Western rulers and ruled agree to interpret the situation in terms of "terrorism", i.e. not to address the situation. Capital and labour seem to jointly dismiss the problem (and its solution) outside what unites and opposes them.

On the wage-earner side, the faceless terrorist embodies what oppresses the solitary commuter who takes the early morning Manhattan ferry or the Rome subway. Wage-labour becomes an impersonal relationship. Few of us know our boss, let alone the "owner"? of the company. The top hatted cigar smoking bourgeois gave way to managers, then to multinationals, and now to financial markets: each time there's less substance. The world rulers seem more and more diffuse, and it's the market that's personified. Money probably remains the most tangible reality, but it's immediate, fluid, and offers no key to grasp the world.

Every day we reproduce a whole that deprives us of the understanding of its totality. We're all aware that the "whole" which dominates us only exists because we make it, but everyone also thinks it's out of reach, because our WE dissolves precisely as we produce this whole. There just remains an indistinct infinity of EGOs, who are able to assert themselves through consumption, and at the best to master their individual bodies and their private lives, not to recompose themselves in a WE that could modify the course of history.

Loss of totality, as Lukacs wrote in 1923. The lonely crowd, as sociology put it in the 1960's. The impact of the September attack aggravates our collective inexistence and, as it treats us as nothing, sadly reminds us of our nothingness. But it does not create that situation, it merely plays upon it. In the commodity and wage realm, fear is a social relationship. This statement will appear farfetched only to those who see no connection

between the world depicted in Kafka's Trial, our daily life, and concentration camps.

The modern wage-earner may be class conscious and think of society as "workers v. boss"?, but doubts he could change what produces this duality and contradiction. He has given up all illusions but one: he believes he'll always be overwhelmed by forces beyond his command.

The terrorist figure gives a face to this out-of-reach unknown, and in turn calls for his opposite: the shield that will protect us from wild terror. The shield has a name: the State. However much the common man might dislike Bush, better Bush than bin Laden.

It's the low intensity of class struggle that breeds passivity, and helps absorb rapidly obsolescent emotional shocks. No wonder a sizeable part of the so-called civilised world briefly united around the ruins of one of its symbols.

In 1970, when GIs were being killed in Indochina, their fight and death led to a critique of US politics and way of life. Nowadays, other American dead bodies rather raise some support for the US, albeit a short lived one. Social critique has long subsided, repressed, drowned in its own contradictions, recuperated. In 2001, the USA is here, in Western Europe and Japan, as well as in Sao Paulo and Seoul.

Americanisation brings Americanism along with spaghetti junctions and optic fibers. Hostility to Uncle Sam is widespread but often reproaches him with not being faithful to his own

values, not allowing enough scope to grassroot democracy, not fully expanding consumer society, not truly supporting separate identities, not really liberating mankind through technology.

As for the capitalists, who can't quite figure how far they've gone into the restructuring that started in the late 1970's, they act as if the main limitation (or even threat) to their historical model came out of the past. Terrorism is the name given to what one can't grasp.

The terrorist is the State's ideal enemy: he justifies everything, arrests, searches, censorship, even paratroopers with assault rifles walking the corridors of the Paris subway. Anything is legitimate against murderers excluded from humanity.

This world loves catastrophes.[3] Thanks to them, central power can pretend it is indispensable (and it is, to a certain extent). But disasters also allow historical crises to be presented as being caused by extremists and fanatics, in other words, by what is "bad" in human nature.

The roots of the "Good or Evil" rhetoric are to be found here. The enlightened European likes to make fun of crude American righteousness, but Europe's policies are more and more determined in the name of Good. As democracy and the market (the former softening the latter) are supposedly the least unpleasant of all worlds, choices and decisions have to be made within their framework. The whole political spectre shares a common belief in a social and technical system that's always under fire, but also regarded as the only possible one. Wage-

labour is not all that pleasant, but everything else is reputed to be much worse. Therefore, if there's trouble, it's because there remains something bad in man, even perverse. The liberal defines this dark side as laziness and a rejection of rules; the leftwinger explains it as intolerance and greed. But both interpret this badness as the result of excess. Mrs Thatcher became (in)famous for her attempt to moralise the poor. Now reformers are becoming famous as they fight for a moderate self-limitating capitalism. Huntington's "clash of civilisations" theory is reactionary indeed, but no more irrelevant than moralising efforts to replace unrestrained unrepentant markets by democratically controlled ones.

"We get bored in town" (Situationist International)

Since September 11, 2001, the same people who denounced high rise blocks as a proof of demented town planning, now list the World Trade Center as part of mankind's heritage. Have they forgotten how they demonstrated against the Organisation of that same Trade?

We won't mourn the Twin Towers. The least we can do is regard those glass and steel cathedrals as we regard San Miniato or Angkor, which also express both human alienation and activity. If a gothic nave is likely to displease less the XXIst century revolutionary than it did the XVIIIth anti-Christian activist, it's because the social function of churches has greatly faded in Western Europe (but not in Greece or Russia, for instance). What goes on inside Wall Street buildings, on the contrary, bears heavily on our lives. Erecting those skyscrapers

was more than a matter of convenience due to the cost of the square meter in the city centre. Office tower blocks are symbols of modern power, and flat suburban sprawl calls for ostentatious verticalism.

Nonetheless, most critiques of the megapolis can hardly refrain some emotion in front of the New York skyline. We don't behold dusk reflected in a wall of mirrors as we would watch a Disneyland parade. The conflict between nature and artifice is only meaningful for man, and is therefore fairly "un-natural". We can choose to think and act as if this world was in its entirety and at every second negative: but, if we do so, we fail to understand how the world goes on. No social system holds together without some active participation, without some positive (i.e. human) content it is able to provide. The bloody critique of Manhattan in September 2001 is not ours, of course. The killers targeted cultural mixing, mobility and diversity, so it was an assault on a dim reflection of the future in the present. Yet the fallen towers remind us that another critique will be needed. Shall we pull down quite a few skyscrapers? Leave them to rust and rot? Or keep some for different uses? Whatever we preserve, it'll never be out of sheer taste for the past. We have no more respect for the past in itself as for the totality of works or opinions.

"Tomorrow's architecture will be a means to know and a means to act." (Internationale Situationniste, n.l, 1958; text written in 1953)[4]

Town life is no more our enemy than other realisations between which nobody can now sort out what to keep and what to reject. For example, a bicycle is surely more pleasant than a motor car, yet both are typical artefacts of the industrial and consumer age. Besides, it would be unfair to stop demolition at architecture. A large part of what has been and is written partakes of class societies: so the iconoclasts should burn the British Library while they pull down the Sphinx.

The mercantile civilisation produces its revolutionary and its reactionary critiques, with a few bridges between them. Only the extreme weakness of the former enables the latter to hold the stage and the wings.

What world disorder?

September 11, 2001 is not the dawning of a new era. It's not this attack that could set the world out of joint, but a disjointed world that made the attack possible.

The general feeling of helplessness in face of the event conveys the difficulty to define "the opposition"? and the means to tackle it. The fall of the WTC sheds light on a predicament that goes back to the 80's: a new system of production does not really supersede Fordism-Taylorism, neither has the "computer revolution"? offered yet what the assembly line used to give.5

Present contradictions (and possible solutions) do not originate in the Afghan mountains. Their cause is internal, and social before it is "geopolitical": the inability of this mode of

production to extend everywhere the positive side of its generalisation.

The world is one. The Sinai Bedouin who makes a living out of selling a few trinkets and selling the image of his way of life to the European visitor walking across the desert, belongs to the same universe as the "trekker". Nike shoes are made in Asia precisely because of the labour conditions that exist in Asia. In what used to be Rhodesia, white farmers and mine managers sweated black labour for the better profit of colonial trade: what is now Zimbabwe has lost this (admittedly racially exploitative) function and is close to bankruptcy. If by a miracle Italy and Thailand reversed their roles on the world market, it would be tradesmen and computer experts from Bangkok who'd go on sex tours in Rome. Fair trade has no place, except as ideology (uneasy conscience plus cosmetic changes), in a system where someone's getting rich depends on somebody else's getting poorer.

Since the demise of the USSR, capital has had great difficulty valorising itself, and can't reorganise the ex-bureaucratic countries into profitable areas.

This world is also suffering from a lack of communist impetus and perspective. Social unrest stays within the limits of neo-reformism, however radical its words and attitudes can be, or of ethnicism, religious fundamentalism, nationalism, quest for identity, etc.

Minority armed actions are nothing new, but September 2001 has a quite different meaning. The 1914 Sarajevo murder, IRA bombs, or Palestinian plane hijackings aimed to promote a State and a national economy. The WTC crashers wished to strike a blow at US power, but did not challenge it with an alternative development model, even an Islamic one.

In the past, in what used to be the "third world", critiques were made in the name of progress, with a determination to beat the ex-colonial powers at their own game. Present revolts only put forward a demand to be oneself, with no modernising ambition. Nationalism breaks into pieces. Indonesia and Vietnam made economic sense: Macedonia and Timor don't. Regions assert their singularity with no program except going back to their roots and obtaining international aid.

A world system is retreating into its historical strongholds: North America, Western Europe, Japan. It allows the rest to lie fallow, and uses it as a place from which to draw resources and value when it can, and to which to restore order (less than before) when it has to. But even so, capital looks fragile. Dis-investing from "New Industrialised Countries" will hinder their growth. In the old days, imperialism countered insurgencies with at least a shadow of development: the Constantine Plan in Algeria, the promotion of rural smallholders in South Vietnam, the funding of a "green revolution"? against the red one, etc. No such scheme today. No-one pretends NATO intervention in ex-Yugoslavia will result in economic growth.

Forget about a new Marshall Plan. In 1947, the idea was to develop countries that had potentials, not Jordan or Ecuador. Moreover, capitalism does not consist in ordering a car on Internet, nor even in making cars, but in producing and selling them with a profit. Pumping dollars into un-developed countries keeps afloat client regimes of the big powers, but does not restore the profitability of those powers. Rich countries dole money out to their own unemployed: they won't support billions in Asia and Africa.

Though capital has been ruling the Earth for a few centuries, its essentials (exchange of labour for money, unity of production and consumption, creation of a domestic market) can't be extended everywhere. But at certain times (in the middle of the XIXth century, at the beginning of the XXth, then after 1945), its productive basis expands and increases the circulation of commodities (and of labour as a commodity) far beyond the borders of its home countries. At other times (in the "Great Depression" of 1873-95, and between the two world wars), it contracts: this is the sort of period we are going through. Frenzied urban growth in the third world signals a breakdown of former communities with no possibility of forcing (as in "State capitalism") or integrating (as in "market capitalism") those uprooted masses into wage-labour. Proletarianisation remains mainly negative.

Capital reifies the planet beyond (capitalist) reason, and puts itself at risk because it splits mankind into two.

On the one hand, those who can sell their labour power, though their social and human condition tends to deteriorate, and their work to lose its content.

On the other hand, the vast majority of human beings, whom capital proves unable to turn into wage-earners. That majority realises that, unlike in post-decolonialisation times, development is now out of reach, with all the frustration and hate that go with this understanding. In the past, many a member of the impoverished middle classes found a career as an organiser of the peasant masses in a bureaucratic party or regime: the failure of State capitalism deprives him of that option. As it happens, the men presumed responsible for the September 11 attack belong to the middle classes. What's important is not the existence of a few dozen thousand "fanatics", but that of hundreds of millions of have nots.

Capital/labour relation rules the world, not because everything would be determined by the tendency to accumulate value, but because this tendency shakes, pulls down or rebuilds the whole of previous relationships. Where it does not prevail, social change (forward or backward) happens through its pressure and against it. It's the thrust of destabilised masses (who can hardly go back to a shattered old style market economy) that fuels revolts. Those used to be channelled into national movements (whatever "nation" means in the Congo or in Sudan), as long as an independent State and an economic take-off were deemed feasible. Revolts now crumble into multiple demands, split along regional, ethnical or religious lines.

There'd be no Israel without antisemitism and extermination camps. But Zionism made it because it was able to turn millions of immigrants into wage-labourers working for companies that sell foodstuff, diamonds, weapons or Hi Tech on the world market. Would a future Palestinian citizen be given a similar job? Would he get a job at all?

What's true outside the capitalist heartland can also be verified inside. Large masses find themselves rejected on the fringe, drugged by consumption and supervised by the State, but eventually left to themselves. In spite of the difference in scale, there is something common between the New York slaughter and the night in Beziers, France, ten days before, when a young man of Arab origin deliberately challenged the police, using even a rocket-launcher, until he got shot.

Whatever reporters and politicians tell us, quite a few earthlings weren't unhappy about the destruction of the WTC. Were the Twin Towers deeply wept for in Belgrade or in the suburbs of Djakarta?... Sooner or later frustration and hate burst into rebellion, often of the worse possible kind, which results in an even worst reaction. The prevailing critique of this world is now negative, and frequently looks back on a mythical pre-capitalist Golden Age.

The over-developed world pays the mirage of its technological (and supposedly intellectual) superiority. For twenty years we've heard that "value creation" comes out of a plastic mouse. The West is so fond of modernity that (in spite of armies of

experts) it never imagined "under-developed" people would dare challenge it and act with such efficiency.

This society is also paying for the myth of the end of economic crises. As "information" was meant to be the prime factor of production, and as information was reported to be growing at every click, the notion of diminishing returns became as old fashioned as Marx.

Politically, it is paying for the belief in the economic withering of the State, which was required to give up its regulating role. Over-privatisation and attacks on real wages have resulted in a growing rift between politics and society. It is significant that the masters of the world, who after all are democratically elected, are forced to meet in bunkers to get away from non-elected but fairly numerous members of their own people. The basics of central power and parliamentary democracy have been ignored for twenty years: by the liberal Right negating the necessary State economic function; by the Left renouncing what distinguishes it from the Right, thereby emptying politics of whatever little meaning it still had. This crisis of legitimate representation exploded in the streets of Gothenburg and Genoa.

Finally, the reduction of the human being to a producer and a consumer ended in an absence of perspectives, of plans and dreams. Supermarket culture is fertile ground for reactionary politics or religious fundamentalism. There'd be less young Muslim extremists saying "Down with music!" if they listened more to Oum Khalsum or Monteverdi than airport music.

These aspects all have one thing in common: a move towards a capital that would be as automated and as independent of human activity as possible. Here we bump into the limit of what Invariance too hastily called the "anthropomorphosis of capital": capital can go quite far, but won't turn into flesh. Contrary to Debord's view in his last writings, spectacle is not self-supporting either. Capitalist civilisation remains a relation between labour and value, and labour implies human and social creatures.

Capital is autonomised value only as far as it puts living beings to work. It often dreams to get rid of them, for example through robotisation. The CIA and FBI failed to prevent September 11 partly because they overestimated electronic surveillance: police and spies share the delusions of their contemporaries. Likewise, excessive automatic control of passengers and luggage reflects a preference for technology over downsized and underpaid personnel. Technique is lifeless without those who activate it. There's no value without work, no war without soldiers (and casualties), no social control without live cops.

The fall of the Twin Towers saw the ultimate downfall of modernism and (whatever that meant) post-modernism.

Capital needs proletarians, but also their somewhat active participation, which it won't get by simply making them consume more. There's more in a car than just a car. The system can't sweep under the carpet those proles it is unable to use. In the most advanced countries, maximum circulation

implies a minimum of integration. Capital's logic is not to give everyone a job, but to leave many people with a reasonable hope to get one some day.

The dissolution of the State capitalist bloc meant a real victory for the Western and Japanese ruling classes, but led them to overconfidence. Capitalists decided to fear no outside or inside enemy, and thought their system only had to exist in order to assert itself. Actually, the US, Europe and Japan have proved unable to stabilise the areas liberated by the end of bureaucratic regimes.

"Reconquest" cannot only be material and strategic: in the long run, no system can rely on mere constraint. Full recovery will have to be political and social, but nothing significant seems to be coming that way, and the present war context is not the ideal time for it.

The September attack cruelly unmasks a typical feature of the last twenty years: a lack of great historical designs, a shortage of ideals. The rebellious youth and proles of the 6O-70's were so confused about the social change they asked for that they were finally made to accept it in the form of technological perpetual motion. (Chatting through a screen is a poor, albeit an adequate answer to the "free communication" rhetoric of the 60*s.) So it worked. But it's not enough to bring the new social system of production to full maturity.

In the less developed areas, no leader or party is now able to launch any primitive accumulation. In the past, when the

maoist bureaucracy pushed millions of Chinese into proving the superiority of socialism in the pursuit of happiness, it did not only force them at gun point: the prospect of better days justified violence and hardship. Similar rallying projects are no longer on the agenda. With the taliban, for the first time, imperialism is fighting third world troublemakers who turn their backs on wage-labour development. One thing that the taliban had promised (and partly achieved) was to bring safety to the wayfarer, to allow a free flow of goods through the country, as in the days of the caravan trade. More merchant than industrial capital, actually. There's no room left for self-centered growth. The current boom in China concerns 10 to 20% of the population and pushes the rest aside. Either African and Asian leaders do as the IMF and the multinationals say, or they manage their countries from hand to mouth, or they prey upon their own people. It's fairly easy for a bin Laden to look like a new Robin Hood, a champion of the poor against the corrupt.

Meanwhile, in the rich countries, the underclass bypasses capital by surviving in the black economy.

Islamism itself is already on the wane as a historical project. Its aim was to make Islam the social framework of viable development, which implies participation in (but not domination by) the world market, otherwise the country's future will be similar to that of Antigua or Vanuatu. As it happens, forcing the shariah into moral standards is one thing, reorganising the economy and the whole of society on its basis is another. Vice squads are bad for trade. The ayatollahs make money selling Persian oil, they lost money declaring war on

S.Rushdie. Marxist-leninist dogma was fully consistent with the cult of production: God isn't. In an Islamic country, wage-labour does not exist or expand because of the Koran, but outside it. Religion is definitely out of date as an economic model. Iran is now renouncing it, and neither Pakistan nor the United Arab Emirates ever tried. Saudi Arabia lives off oil, takes great care not to apply the shariah to it, and manages it as a true profane capital.

As for the heart of capital, the September assault has struck at a time when the business cycle is running out of steam. Economists no longer argue about the reality of the recession, only about its magnitude and duration.

Bosses and political leaders rely on a consumption hindered by lowered wages and saturated markets, even in those sectors recently hyped as the spearhead of a new era, such as mobile phones. But it's typical of a vulnerable capitalism that it should regard its prosperity as conditioned by such a volatile factor as consumer confidence. Modern democracy defines its citizen by an unequal but guaranteed share in consumption: he is therefore required not to give his blood on the battlefield, but his money at the till. What if he won't or can't? Among other problems, credit (often financed by stock market hazards) is a time bomb.

We won't go into details about the recession. Let's just mention the repetition of crises (every two or three years, the world system stumbles, either in a group of countries or in a whole sector); a decline of US manufacturing output over an 11

months period, which had been unheard of since 1960; the downward shift from Hi Tech slump to massive lay-offs in finance and industry; decreasing investments, and unemployment on the increase; the need for huge federal subsidies; the contagion between the US and Europe; the new obsession about the perils of a debt economy; not forgetting "emerging" countries which go backward, nor others like Argentina which are on the verge of bankruptcy.

All those indicators point to the persisting self-destructive logic of the system that has shaped the planet for 200 years: this logic has been aggravated and not softened in the last two decades. "Globalisation" speeds up the propagation of crises. The domination of one superpower has the same counter-productive effect as mega-mergers between firms: too much monopoly stifles healthy competition.

Probable Local Victory, Durable Global Unbalance

Stockhausen created quite a stir when he described the fall of the WTC as "the greatest possible work of art". Although the modern artist later added he'd been misunderstood, his initial reaction truly underlined what was at stake. Manhattan's reality is more than material, and those who do business there play more than an economic part.

Like a value pump drawing and redistributing a vital flow, Wall Street is commonly perceived in all rich nations as our heart, and is an object of both worship and curses. The impact of the attack does not derive from its heavy toll, but from the place

where the victims died: the massacre of all the 5,5OO inhabitants of Seaside, Oregon, wouldn't have the meaning conveyed by the destruction of an essential organ of a city portrayed as a new Babylon.

"For in one hour so great riches is brought to nought. And cried when they saw the smoke of her burning, saying, What city is like unto this great city !" (John, The Revelation, 18, 17-18)

Can the US counter-attack rise to such a high symbolic level?

In Ancient days, an empire threatened by what it called barbarians would try and fight them off, but also turn their temples and idols into dust. The obliteration of one of the most representative sights of Manhattan means a debasement of American hegemony in the name of Islamic values. An adequate response ought to strike at these values with as much brilliance and precision. Yet it's hard to imagine Tomahawks smashing Mecca or a holy shrine of lesser rank.[6]

Many competitors, from Peking to London, are pretending to join forces to deal with such a small target as bin Laden & partners, because they fear for their own internal stability. Whatever support he got or still gets from various secret services, bin Laden (or any group waging a similar private war) disrupts a weakened world order.

This is why the US doesn't charge in: it needs to preserve client regimes around Afghanistan and in the Middle East. Over-reacting might increase the negative potential accumulated by "the Wretched of the Earth."[7]

Capital is addressing a pressing question with answers that postpone what would be the best solution for it. In particular, although Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Pakistan are well known centres of radical Islam, the Pentagon does its best not to disturb their internal stability. It will try not to antagonise Muslim allies, and make up for it by adding ruins to more ruins in Afghanistan, or elsewhere, in Iraq ...

In other words, an unprecedented political challenge (even if it just aimed at a symbol) will only be met by a law and order enforcement operation. The big powers are faced with what they present as a major threat (and it is indeed because of its causes), reply with an answer that does not deal with these causes, and don't quite seem to believe in what they're doing. After 1918, the victors acted as if the Versailles Treaty and the League of Nations were opening up a long period of peace. In 1945, the Allies kept repeating they were getting rid of dictators and genocide. The dislocation of colonial empires also gave birth to high hopes of entering an era of mutual respect by all countries, and of development and social justice. People held beliefs then. Today, the States are treating terrorism as crime: but nobody has ever pretended that the elimination of any criminal (even of an evil one) would put an end to crime. It's probably the first time that rulers admit they're not dealing at all with the heart of the matter.

Escalation is rather unlikely, but always possible: nobody knows how hard the sledge-hammer will try and crush the obnoxious fly, nor what bloody fragments it will scatter around. In any case, in the apocalyptic image war for a new millenium, Bush

has a handicap against his black twin.8 No Special Forces or SAS feat could beat the fall of the two monoliths. Even if bin Laden gets caught, killed or brought to trial, his memory will survive that of his powerful victor.

Either capital (incarnated and led by its Number One) goes over the top, and stirs more trouble than it's supposed to repress. Or it under-reacts. On the one hand, "reconquering" the world risks reinforcing what produced the attack. On the other, reducing politics to minimal police work opens the door unto new assaults.

Mutatis mutandis, in the 1930's, democracies tried to appease nazi expansionism, and in fact postponed the day of reckoning.

Third World War, Then? Not Today, But The Day After Tomorrow

Capital may well overcome the shock and its aftermath, but it's doubtful it'll solve the long term problems we've summed up. It's most likely it will be carried away on the path that can only deteriorate its situation.

From our point of view, the more time the capitalist answer will take, the more the communist perspective will have to wait. There's no dynamic proletariat without a dynamic capital, that is, a capital that provokes a (possible) rejection of the riches it proposes, not only of the misery it imposes. A radical critique may be dawning, but seems nowhere able to assert and organise itself.

The time has not yet come for communist renewal, nor for large inter-imperialist conflicts. Europe did not go to war in 1914 because of the killing of an Austrian prince, but because of industrial civilisation's inability to expand in peace. The USA is and will be more threatened by European, maybe by Japanese, Chinese..... competitors, than by Islam radicals. A proletarianisation without its actual wage-labour counterpart: here is the source of upheavals that are serious but not enough to drag the big powers into an overall conflict.

The historical significance of the US counteroffensive is not its all too real capacity to wreak havoc in Afghanistan or any other poor country. It lies in the advances and setbacks experienced through the present convulsions by the major capitalist powers of today and tomorrow. As a Pentagon report stated in 1992, American strategy's main objective is "to prevent the emergence of any global potential competitor".[9]

Neither Europe nor Russia waited long before playing their own part in a false anti-terrorist coalition that will bring about all possible and unpredictable realignments and reversals of alliances.[10] Imperialist rivalries lead the world, and in the absence of revolution will result in huge conflagrations, detonated and not caused by minor peripheral conflicts. Until then, "war on terrorism" amounts to a public relations job, at the cost of a few billion dollars, increased police powers, and heaps of corpses.

Bin Laden is an internal contradiction within capitalism, not one of its contradictors. We can even hardly speak of an "archaic"

movement, since the past re-surfaces only under the weight and pressure of modernity. Tradition yields wherever commodity and wage-labour can be introduced on a large scale.

Islamism is no more a feasible return to the past than the USSR offered an alternative to Western capitalism. It was fairly easy to understand that the Eastern bloc belonged to the same world system as Spain or Belgium, since wage-labour and a cult of production were plain to see in all bureaucratic regimes. This integration is less visible in the case of radical Islam, because it claims a different ideology. But capital will never disseminate uniform progress, or progress that would finally be more evenly spread on a world scale.

The unemployed Bengali and the Irish call center worker experience a dispossession and a domination that are basically similar, though never addressed in what they have in common. The September 11, 2001 attack and the ensuing counter-offensive set these two proletarians even further away from each other.

Capitalism and barbarism: that's our near future.

J.-P. Carasso, G.Dauvé, K.Nesic
October 22, 2001

Notes

- 1. This is a slightly modified and shortened version of the 1st Lettre de troploin, written by J.-P.Carasso, G.Dauve

and K.Nesic, October 2001, available on the Troploin website.

- 2. D.Watson, Civilisation is Like a Jetliner, 1983, in Against the Megamachine, Autonomedia.
- 3. See Murdering the Dead. Amadeo Bordiga on Capitalism & Other Disasters, Antagonism Press, 2001.
- 4. Among other texts, Potlatch, n.25, October 1955. If a city like the old Paris no longer exists, New York too has been socially purified, not by Islam, but by its own local authorities. See Bruce Benderson on that matter.
- 5. This will be developed in a forthcoming text, Dynamique de la retraction, of which we hope to produce an English version.
- 6. A more profound US victory would not humiliate Islam, but valorise it in the best American way. It would turn mollahs into tele-evangelists, recuperate idolatry into mercantile practice and, in full respect of the abstraction inherent in the Koran, sell not fetishes as the Catholics still do at Assisi, but a genuine immaterial spirituality. No pictures, no statues, just fleshless and pure pixels, the soul without the body, at last, and Islam as the true virtual religion of the computer age. Alas, Mecca is not in California.
- 7. The title of the famous third-worldist book published by Franz Fanon in 1961 had strong religious overtones.
- 8. On Bush and bin Laden as twins, see A.Roy, The Algebra of Social Justice, published in The Guardian, and available on http://www.tehelka.com
- 9. Quoted in Foreign Affairs, Summer 2001.

- 10. Those whose anti-Americanism sums up their critique of this world have no critique of this world. Identifying capitalism with the USA is tantamount to supporting one camp against the other.